The Necessary, the Sufficient and the Excessively Rich[1]

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Abstract

L'articolo propone tre punti principali. In primo luogo, si afferma che ogni riflessione sulla distribuzione economica dovrebbe riferirsi al processo distributivo nella sua totalità invece di concentraris soltanto sulle posizioni più deboli o su quelle estreme (ricchezza e povertà). È necessario, piuttosto, prendere in considerazione l'intero spettro distributivo. Dovremmo stabilire un livello di "abbastanza" nel settore intermedio della struttura distributiva. In secondo luogo, l'articolo afferma che la vera sfida per ogni teoria normativa su questioni distributive consiste nel concepire e specificare con esattezza questo "abbastanza". In terzo luogo, l'articolo accenna a possibili strategie per creare procedure che determinino una soglia per la ricchezza eccessiva e per ciò che è abbastanza, ossia per ciò che è "sufficiente".

Parole chiave: distribuzione economica, "abbastanza", povertà, ricchezza, "sufficiente".

The paper makes three main points. First, it claims that reflections on economic distribution should refer to the entire distribution order, instead of focusing solely on the weakest positions or of referring to the extreme positions (poverty and wealth). What is needed, however, is an assessment of the entire distribution spectrum. We should determine a level of 'enough' in the middle range of the distribution structure. Second, the paper claims that the real challenge of normative theory on distribution issues consists in the conception and precise specification of this 'enough'. Third, it points to strategies to create procedures for determining a threshold for excessive wealth and for what is enough, the 'sufficient'.

Keywords: economic distribution, "enough", poverty, wealth, "sufficient".

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1 Introduction

The literature on distributive justice has mostly dealt with the group of the *least-advantaged members* of a society. Since 2000, moreover, rising social inequality in many countries has translated into growing attention being paid to questions of poverty and poverty reduction. Approaches under the title of sufficientarianism[1] also share this focus on the lower level in a distributive order, even if a comparison-centered, relational approach to justice is denied.

In the last few years, criticism of excessive fortunes and the societal role of plutocrats, with their enormous influence on the political development of several Western societies, has also made *wealth* a relevant category for normative considerations on distributive justice. With limitarianism[2], a way of looking at the top of a distributive order has emerged. It is to be welcomed that philosophical work now also refers to the pole of wealth.

However, the following remarks recommend going a step further. This entails considering the entire distributive order and subjecting it to normative assessment. The category that needs to be established, also as a departure from previous sufficientarianist approaches, is that of the *sufficient*, the category of having *enough* – clearly beyond the necessary, beyond the fulfilment of basic needs.

In this paper, three main points will be made:

1 Reflections on economic distribution should refer to the entire distribution order. So far, however, the discussion either concentrates solely on the area of the weakest positions and poverty, or refers to the extreme positions both of poverty and wealth. What is needed, however, is an assessment of the entire distribution spectrum, starting with those positions that normatively have too little and ending with those positions that clearly have too much. It is not only necessary to determine what is necessary and what is the threshold to the situation of having too much, it is also necessary to determine a level of 'enough' in the middle range of the distribution structure.

2 The real challenge of normative theory on distribution issues consists in the conception (What is the standard of enough?) and the precise specification of this enough (At what economic level is enough located?).

3 What exactly can be considered the precise threshold has only been shown for the case of what is necessary. How the level of social assistance benefits should be determined has always been controversial. It is all the more difficult to create procedures for determining a threshold for excessive wealth and what is enough, the 'sufficient'.

2 An Evaluative Terminology for the Entire Distributive Order

My core point is the idea that the entire socio-economic distribution order should be subjected to a normative assessment, not only the positions of the least-advantaged members of society or those with extreme wealth. As a first approximation, the entire distributional order can be captured in a purely normative-evaluative terminology as follows:

Zu wenig	Too little
Notwendig	**Necessary**
Nicht genug	Not enough
Genug	**Enough**, **sufficient**
Mehr als genug	More than enough
Übermäßig viel	**Excessively/overly rich**
Zu viel	Too much

Necessary, enough and overly rich are designations for the *thresholds* (in bold) beyond which another *distribution sector* begins. The categories too little, not enough, more than enough and too much designate the different distribution sectors that are separated from each other by the three thresholds. This is a conceivable, certainly simple normative structuring of all levels of a distribution order. But the terminology chosen no longer leaves the area between too little and too much, which certainly affects the majority of the populations in OECD societies, without any categorization; rather, the 'middle' area between poverty and wealth is now normatively restructured into the sectors of not enough and more than enough by means of enough/sufficient (I use these two words synonymously) as a threshold value. The chosen terminology for an evaluative view of the entire distribution order thus comprises four distribution sectors and three threshold values. The following explanations concentrate on the theoretical problems that arise from the conception and specification of the three thresholds: the necessary, the sufficient and the excessively rich.

3 Necessary, Sufficient and Excessively Rich in the Context of a Theory of Justice

Conceptions of the necessary, the sufficient and the excessively rich can be developed as autonomous theories of justice, each independent of the other. For the necessary, this has already been achieved in theories of needs-based justice,[3] the excessively rich has been referred to in the new theories of limitarianism, and the sufficient is addressed in theories of sufficientarianism.

If one of these conceptions of justice is advocated as a principle for all questions of distributive justice, the question arises whether the overall structure of a distribution can also be normatively evaluated with each of them. The resulting problems can be shown most clearly for needs-based justice: What statements does the principle of needs-based justice help to make when needs are met and other resources are still available? What idea of justice determines the distribution beyond the level of what is necessary? Is the attempt to build a theory of justice solely on needs-based justice, i.e. based monocriterially on the category of needs, not misguided?

The same applies to a philosophy of sufficiency oriented towards the level of the enough: what happens beyond the threshold at which enough is available for everyone or has been distributed to them?

Limitarianism did not even start out with the claim of such a monocriterial theory of justice; rather, it sees itself as a supplement to theories previously oriented towards need or equality, i.e. it is an additional element within the framework of a more comprehensive theory of justice that is oriented either towards a higher-level single criterion or towards a combination of several criteria, e.g. equality, merit, performance, i.e. a plural theory of justice.[4] The construction of a theory of justice that can normatively determine the entire distribution order together with the three thresholds should therefore take into account the following requirement: The conception of the three thresholds should ultimately be traceable to solely one pattern of argumentation. All three levels must be justifiable with an essentially identical figure of reasoning, so that a coherent system of conceptualization of thresholds can emerge. Instead of developing three different theories – the theories of needs-based justice, limitarianism and sufficientarianism – it is preferable to design one theory of justice that has a higher degree of internal coherence.

4 Limitarianism

A significant enlargement of the body of theories of justice beyond the realm of poverty reduction and the elevation of the position of the least-advantaged members has taken place by addressing the issue of wealth. For the German-speaking world, the book published in 2018 by Christian Neuhäuser, entitled *Reichtum als moralisches Problem* (Wealth as a moral problem) has been an important contribution.[5] It provides a theoretical evaluation of wealth in a very systematical fashion, right up to the idea of a ban on excessive wealth, an idea which, due to its infeasibility, is ultimately withdrawn in favor of a pragmatic strategy of small steps of limiting such forms of wealth. However, the radical nature of the moral philosophical argumentation is not affected by these political conclusions. On the basis of the concept of self-respect, Neuhäuser proposes how to conceive what can be considered harmful wealth, how a threshold of wealth can be determined and why counter-arguments for a general justification of wealth cannot be convincing.

Internationally, the more recent publications by Ingrid Robeyns,[6] who for a long time worked on Sen's Capability Approach,[7] has become known as a strong approach to "economic limitarianism". This approach is based on an analogy with the poverty line[8] and accordingly seeks to establish a quite similar limit for monetary wealth. Robeyns defines economic limitarianism as "the view that no one should hold surplus money, which is defined as the money one has over and above what one needs for a fully flourishing life".[9] In *Having Too Much*, she went on to define a general limitarianism that is not limited to economics. In this definition, the reference to money is missing. However, the reference to a should/shouldn't and the reference to a "flourishing life" are also present in this more general definition: "In a nutshell, limitarianism advocates that it is not morally permissible to have more resources than are needed to fully flourish in life."[10] Even if such a general limitarianism is conceivable, Robeyns focuses on an economic approach, which is limited in certain respects. "Limitarianism is not about rich people per se; instead it is about the effects of the situation of extreme wealth in society."[11] It is above all the argument that the super-rich can convert their position of economic power into political power. This transformative power is the reason that makes limitations necessary. Limitations are necessary because of empirically verifiable consequences of the actions of super-rich people. If these consequences did not occur, there would be no reason to consider wealth morally problematic. The arguments Robeyns makes in *What, if Anything, is Wrong with Extreme Wealth?* (2019) are not, like those of Christian Neuhäuser, unconditional. The possibility of other people's self-respect is diminished per se when there is excessive wealth. It is not specific consequences of wealth that would have to be empirically demonstrated in each case. Due to the mutual observation of members in a society, the capacity for self-respect is destroyed in general whenever excessive wealth exists in a society. Robeyn's argumentation is more instrumental, it limits wealth when political power becomes unequal, whereas Neuhäuser generally assumes a morally damaging effect of wealth in itself and therefore seeks to justify a general prohibition of wealth, even if this is not feasible for political reasons.

5 The sufficient

Following the pattern of poverty and wealth thresholds, a third threshold, the threshold of enough can also be thought of. Below this threshold lies the sector of not enough, above it is the sector of more than enough. As soon as the term sufficient is used for this threshold, a demarcation from the present literature is necessary for the understanding of the following argumentation.

Sufficiency is used today in two contexts: a philosophical and an ecological one. In philosophy, the category of sufficiency has been used prominently since Harry Frankfurt's attack on egalitarian conceptions of justice.[12] Inequalities are not the crucial bone of contention for this theory of justice. It is only a matter of the worse-off having enough, regardless of whether others have the same amount. Adequacy, not equality, should be the criterion of just distribution. Works that further develop this position are attributed as contributions to sufficientarianism. In this line of argumentation, Frankfurt's conception is understood as an alternative specification of what is necessary. Accordingly, the criterion of equality does not help to determine what people need as individual persons. Their needs are far too different, too individual, to be able to justify a defining line for the subsistence minimum that is the same for everyone. The sufficient is rather understood as what is *individually necessary*.

Independently of these philosophical discussions, and possibly with a now wider scope, sufficiency has developed in the context of the debates on sustainability as a criterion of what is ecologically necessary or acceptable, especially in terms of climate policies and degrowth.[13] The term sufficiency was introduced into ecological literature as early as the 1970s through the work of Herman E. Daly.[14] In the German-speaking world, the work of Wolfgang Sachs from 1993 was influential, elevating sufficiency to a complementary term to efficiency. In addition to an efficiency revolution, he also called for a sufficiency revolution, a linguistic change of direction that still determines sustainability writing today. In this line of development, the sufficient is the *ecologically necessary*, which entails restrictions on what is desired for the individual or the social collective.

Only recently have these two lines of discussion been more systematically related to each other.[15] The individualization of the necessary in the philosophical discussion contrasts with a globalization perspective on the part of ecological sufficiency theories. However, the approach of using sufficiency to designate what is necessary has remained characteristic of both lines of discussion.

Here, a different conceptual approach is chosen: Sufficiency should be used as a term for determining its own threshold at a level clearly above the necessary, but also clearly below the excessively rich. Accordingly, sufficient is not a critical threshold below which no one should fall, it is rather the value to which we should all aspire as a value that enables each individual person to be able to lead an adequate life (in relation to the respective technological, economic and social conditions).

The necessary denotes a threshold that should not be fallen short of. The excessive denotes a threshold that should not be exceeded. The sufficient is a threshold that considers a level below and above it to be legitimate, i.e. it does not separate the permissible from the impermissible. It is rather an *orientation value for life* in today's societies, around which one's own distribution position should move. *Enough is what should be normatively exemplary for all,* neither more nor less. Enough is far more than just what we absolutely need to be able to live a life worthy of human beings. Enough is far less than what constitutes the too much today and can be normatively delegitimized as excessively rich.

6 Defining Enough

A widely accepted (only differently interpreted) rationale for the conception of the threshold of what is *necessary* as the basis of needs-based justice is *avoidance of harm*.[16] Necessary is that which is absolutely necessary to lead a normal or decent life (in a certain society), i.e. not to be exposed to harms that make it impossible to lead a life appropriate to this society and its requirements and possibilities. To this end, one can define basic needs in order to determine what is absolutely necessary for a person to survive and live as a fellow human being in society.

To determine *wealth* thresholds, one can proceed in two ways. One can speak of a *fully flourishing life* as a benchmark instead of a normal or decent life, as Ingrid Robeyns has done. What is necessary to be able to exercise such a clearly expanded conception of life? If the conditions for the possibility of practicing such a life are not fulfilled, one can also speak of injury, harm, but not as physical or mental injury, but as falling short of the high level set with the idea of a fully flourishing life. If there is even more than is necessary for this life, then a limit is reached beyond which wealth becomes illegitimate.

Another path has been taken by Christian Neuhäuser. He focuses his considerations on avoidance of harm to the dignity and self-respect of other persons. Avoidance of harm is no longer just about the persons in question, but the impact of their position in the distribution order on the situation of others. And this not only with regard to serious physical injuries and restrictions on action, but also to the possibility of being able to respect oneself and not having one's dignity violated. For Neuhäuser, wealth per se harms the self-respect of third parties and is thus a moral problem.

But how is *enough* to be defined? A recourse to avoidance of harm cannot have the same force here, because the distribution sectors above and below the enough are not illegitimate. Harm is a good justification criterion only for cases in which there is harm beyond the threshold but none on the other side. Harm creates the legitimacy difference between the distribution sectors on this side or beyond the wealth or poverty threshold.

Therefore, enough will have to be defined in a different way. Enough is what one needs for living *any conception of a good life, which is universalizable*. The rationale draws on the ethical category of the good life, but admits as a criterion those conceptions of good life that are universalizable, conceptions of a good life that must survive a test of the following kind: Could one imagine that the people in this society, but also the people in the whole world including future generations, could ever choose such a way of life for themselves without this making the good life of other people impossible?

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The standard of sufficiency is the *good life*, but not presented as a philosophically specified and objectively definable quantity,[17] but as a plurality of conceptions of good life that have survived a certain test and can therefore be considered normatively acceptable forms of practicing a specific form of good life. These are to be considered "legitimate forms of good life" in the following. What counts as harm to the possibility of a good life, i.e. as not enough, is that which makes it impossible to live such a legitimate conception of a good life; enough is that which allows a conception of a legitimate good life to be lived. However, this sufficiency only exists for the totality of legitimate conceptions of a good life, not for several thresholds of sufficiency for each individual conception of a good life.

7 Specifying Enough

The conception and justification of thresholds will only be supported in the academic as well as the political sphere if a specification of a precise level of these thresholds is also presented. Even if only approximate values or bandwidths are sought, there is a danger that the precise specification of normative thresholds will only be seen as a subjective, arbitrary act. How can we succeed in finding methods and procedures that allow for an intersubjectively acceptable form of threshold specification?

There is an immense body of literature on the specification of needs, of what is necessary and of basic needs in the context of discussions on poverty and poverty reduction, which covers more than 120 years of research and controversy. Since the act of specifying what is necessary is directly followed by political demands and regulations, the specification of levels is discussed in great detail.

In the area of determining enough and too much, on the other hand, there is hardly any experience with normatively-specified definitions, also because politically relevant fixations have generally not been made.

7.1 Science-based Objectification

Since the first systematic surveys on poverty in England in the 19th century, the attempt to objectify what is necessary followed procedures that are close to the natural sciences. The calculation of the necessary food requirements for life could refer to the measurement of calories, because food represents one of life's central necessities. The objectification in nutritional science is based on a concept of the necessary that aims solely at avoiding harm in the sense of severe diseases and death. If the category of the necessary comes close to mere survival, the strategy of scientific objectification can still be successful. But even survival is a category that is open to interpretation and controversial even within natural science, and it is also dependent on individual physical conditions and reacts to historical and social contexts.

The basket-of-goods procedure used in Germany until the 1980s to determine the level of social assistance can also be understood as an extension of the scientific method of objectification, only now the point of reference is minimal participation in social life.

Ultimately, however, even for the area of necessities, all scientific attempts at objectification have proven to be inadequate: The spectrum of what is necessary for survival is broader than what can be measured scientifically, e.g., in the area of social proximity, personal recognition and communication. There is no clear boundary, but a wide transitional area between what is no longer sufficient for survival and what just ensures survival. With the transition in the concept of the necessary from a pure understanding of survival to a concept of societal inclusion, attempts at objectification allied to the natural sciences are also less and less convincing, since there are too many alternatives within the sciences.

It is therefore problematic when the concept of the (ecologically) sufficient is now subjected to a similar strategy of specification via scientific objectification, even if not on the level of individual needs, but on the level of the ecological carrying capacity of the planet. The normative assumptions of such ecological boundary concepts have certainly been explicated in the literature: The "planetary boundaries" prominent in the ecological debate are neither absolute limits, beyond which human social life would be immediately terminated, nor limitations in the sense of tipping points in human-determined physical and biological developments. The concept of planetary boundaries developed by a group around Johan Rockström clearly states their character: "Here, thresholds are defined as non-linear transitions in the functioning of coupled human-environmental systems. Thresholds are intrinsic features of those systems and are often defined by a position along one or more control variables.... Boundaries, on the other hand, are human-determined values of the control variable set at a 'safe' distance from a dangerous level .... Determining a safe distance involves normative judgments of how societies choose to deal with risk and uncertainty".[18] Here, a precise distinction is made between limits as threshold values beyond which non-linear changes occur and normative considerations, here those of a safe distance from extreme disasters and uncontrollability.

7.2 Statistics

Today, poverty policy is dominated by statistical studies for the specification of what is necessary. In Germany, a survey of income and consumption patterns of the lowest income quintile of the population is used to calculate the standard rate of social assistance benefits via a number of politically determined deductions. Alternative statistical procedures include referring to a percentage of the median of an income distribution (poverty risk ratios). The statistical calculation is a form of (scientific) objectification that also makes it possible to avoid political decisions and to leave poverty policy to automated adaptation by linking it to an index. However, this objectification is based on empirical surveys of the actual consumption and lifestyles of population groups. There is no sustainable argumentative connection between the empirical surveys and the specification of the percentages (the lowest quintile; 60% of the median equivalent income, etc.) on the one hand and the conception of what is necessary (e.g. for participation in social life) on the other: it is quite possible that 60% of the reference income does not ensure societal inclusion.

A comparable problem arises in the area of the definition of wealth thresholds. Christian Neuhäuser, for example, has attempted to specify his self-respect-based conception of wealth in terms of 200 or 300% of the median income.[19] This is certainly in line with the argumentation logic of poverty and wealth reports, but is it an effective realization of the self-respect conception? Hardly. Because how should a 'conversion rate' between self-respect and income be determined?

Here, the use of political decision-making procedures is to be preferred. In this way, a specific decision-making body could be determined, which would set a threshold level by majority vote - also using scientific and statistical considerations. In these political procedures, however, the tension between objectification, centering on arguments and subjective arbitrariness is repeated: When seeking to establish a certain level of the necessary, of the excessively rich or of enough, arguments have to be put forward. Argumentation, however, means avoiding arbitrariness. But what can an argumentation refer to that does not expose itself to scientific objectification or statistical calculation? There is probably *only the possibility of discussing forms of life and their legitimacy*: Is this a way of life that enables societal inclusion, is this a way of life based on enormous wealth that makes the self-respect of other people impossible?

7.3 Argumentation on Good Life

Even the percentage specifications oriented towards an average often make explicit reference to "normalities" that go beyond the mere percentage value. The average or median is merged or associated with a normality in such a way that the average also expresses what can be considered normal and usual as a way of life. The mathematical mean or median receives a tangible, life-form-related character.

However, one can also dispense with a statistical classification altogether and use a specific form of life (however tangibly it may be described) as a reference. This, however, departs from a justice-theoretical foundation of the thresholds. Ethical questions take the place of moral questions. John Rawls tried to counteract such a shift towards ethics with the concept of basic goods: His basic goods are resources for any form of good life. Martha Nussbaum had rejected this goods-centered approach (in agreement with Amartya Sen) and (in dissent with Sen) presented a list of ten basic capabilities. Ensuring these capabilities, such as physical health and integrity, imagination, connectedness with others, play, etc., becomes the theoretical goal. This may be a rather weak conception of a good life that leaves a lot of room for individual ways of living. In contrast to Rawls and Nussbaum, Skidelsky and Skidelsky in *How much is enough? The Love of Money, and the Case for the Good Life* (2012), have presented a list of basic goods, including health, security, respect, personality, harmony with nature, which are direct expressions of a universally conceived conception of good life that applies to all people. Thus, a global ethical standard is regarded as binding; the sufficiency that the two authors want to propagate is measured against a universal standard of good life. This argumentation is likely to face the general objections to the setting of a universal standard in ethics: Paternalism and Eurocentrism are elements of this tableau of criticism.[20]

Here, the path chosen is to introduce only a test procedure for universalizability or generalizability of specific forms of good life. Specific ways of living must undergo a test of generalizability and can only be considered a basis for determining the enough if they pass this test. The resources that are needed on average to practice those legitimate forms of good life (which can be very different forms of life) form the enough in economic terms.

8 Orientation Guideline, Moral Yardstick or Political Program?

What follows from a specification of these thresholds, especially the specification of the enough? First of all, it is an orientation marker, a new conceptual parameter against which individual and social behavior can be measured. Enough is a discursive intervention that can influence and change patterns of interpretation and modes of action to the extent of its perception and dissemination.

The discussion of the definition of enough has shown, however, that enough could also be defended as a moral value - i.e. as a marker with a claim to binding force. A morality of enough would mean that it is a binding line of conduct to make enough possible for all people, to counteract tendencies towards an always more than enough and, where there is not enough, to provide for this enough - without exerting pressure to standardize different ways of life.

However, such a moral obligation could also be applied to political, especially legal action. The definition of what is necessary has been incorporated into human rights catalogues and their interpretation, for example in Germany the construction of a right to a "minimum subsistence level fit for human beings". Necessary needs must be met politically. If one knows what is necessary and if it can be determined who definitely does not reach the necessary, then legal measures institutionalized by the state are mandatory.

Limitarianism also discusses political measures. Even if a ban on wealth appears to be completely illusionary, measures for a gradual reduction of wealth are being discussed, especially in tax law. Different levels of sales tax, luxury and wealth taxes, an increase of the top rate in income tax or the reform of corporate taxes are common proposals; in addition, as a more relational approach, there is the idea of a legal limitation to the income spread which is being discussed in Switzerland.

In the case of enough, it is far less clear and less discussed what its political implementation could mean. Moreover, any legislative intervention towards enough would meet with the argument that liberties would be restricted here. Even the discussion of threshold values - before any state measures are even conceived - could be experienced as an encroachment on freedoms experienced as a matter of course, so that even thinking about such levels would be seen as an illegitimate intervention. Only where a necessity can be argued, i.e. in a concept of ecological sufficiency, do political measures appear as self-evident. However, if one wants to justify - as here - a threshold for the sufficient and the enough beyond an ecological argumentation, one has to confront the argument of freedom loss and present a concept of social freedom in which the orientation towards the sufficient entails legal-political consequences.

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